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Root Causes of Violence in Post-Civil War Guatemala: A Literature Review

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Duilia Mora Turner ,

"The agents were clearly visible on that recent afternoon, but the migrants were undeterred. Mainly women and children, 45 in all, they crossed the narrow river on the smugglers' rafts, scrambled up the bluff and turned themselves in, signaling a growing challenge for the immigration authorities . . . The migrants are no longer primarily Mexican laborers. Instead they are Central Americans, including many families with small children and youngsters without their parents . . . driven out by deepening poverty but also by rampant gang violence, increasing numbers of migrants caught here seek asylum . . . As agents booked them, the migrants waited quietly: a Guatemalan mother carrying a toddler with a baby bottle, another with an infant wrapped in blankets."[1]

The aforementioned vignette provides a small glimpse of Guatemala's increasing violent crime problem and how it has become a transnational issue. Today's national headlines show the alarming numbers of Central American children, many from Guatemala, illegally crossing the U.S. border to escape from violence and to search of a better life. In Guatemala, government institutions are fragile and fragmented, contributing to its long history of security challenges. Guatemala's vulnerabilities are a concern to the United States, particularly its crime proliferation and impunity. According to U.S. Congressional Research Service reports, transnational crime with roots in Guatemala is a major problem. It is estimated drug traffickers have effective control of more than half of the Guatemalan territory and gang affiliation increased from 14,000 to 22,000 members between 2007 and 2012.[2]

Guatemala's critical environment requires careful study, leading to identification of root causes and corrective actions. While accounts of crime and violence in Guatemala are widely available, theoretical approaches designed specifically for this nation are rare. Nevertheless, a few scholars have devised theories applicable to the understanding of Guatemala's challenges. Select theoretical works attempting to explain the root causes of Guatemala's security issues predominantly combine three factors: democratic consolidation, social apathy and complicity, and economic challenges. This literature review will analyze these scholarly works, but first, it will provide a brief description of Guatemala's current forms of crime.

Critical Forms of Crime in Contemporary Guatemala

The majority of the literature concerning security issues in Guatemala is based on journalistic and historical accounts. Various scholars, reporters, and international organizations have recounted in detail Guatemala's environment of crime, violence, and corruption in order to bring awareness and further understand these problems. The following section will discuss major trends identified by seven authors.

Drug Trafficking

Guatemala has become a key location for drug trafficking, bridging South America to Mexico and the United States. In 2010, the U.S. Department of State "estimated that more than 60 percent of the cocaine passing through the Central American bridge states en route to the United States had transited Guatemala." [3] This alarming statistic is due to the infiltration of Mexican and Colombian drug lords in the country. These narco-traffickers have created networks within Guatemala, often referred to as *cartelitos*. [4] In *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation*, Julie M. Bunck and Michael R. Fowler explain, "During the 1990s a number of *cartelitos* developed in Guatemala, each specializing in particular routes and methods and each with its own contacts with the larger Colombian and Mexican organizations." [5] Frank Smith, an investigative journalist, refers to Guatemala as an "untraceable narco-state" and points out that political figures, as well as high ranking military officers, are deeply involved in drug networks, creating alliances and undermining the justice system. [6] Bunck and Fowler point out that Drug trafficking advances other illicit activities in Guatemala such as smuggling of arms, money laundering, kidnapping, stealing, and murder. [7]

Violent Gangs

Elin C. Ranum explains that in Guatemala gangs "are associated with high levels of crime and violence." [8] But violent gangs, or *maras*, are a relatively new phenomenon; a few decades ago, violent gang activity in Guatemala was much lower. [9] In the 1990s gangs became hierarchical and more organized at the local level, in part due to gang members deportation from the United States to Guatemala. [10] Today, gang activity is widespread and an increasing threat to security. Unfortunately for some Guatemalans, non-affiliation is not an option; as Ranum discusses, some members are born within gangs and through a vicious cycle, cannot escape it. [11] Gang activity is mostly related to drug crimes, thefts, possession of illegal weapons, and to a much lesser extent, murder. [12] In regards to gang related homicide, Ranum makes an interesting observation: "Other than in Guatemala city, homicide rates are highest in areas where drug trafficking and organized crime take place, versus areas where gangs prevail." [13] Another point Ranum makes is that gang members are also victims of violence through social cleansing and from Guatemala's repressive institutional system. [14]

Social Cleansing and Lynch Law

Social cleaning is the systematic killing of "undesirable" persons, such as gang members and other criminals, by individual citizens within the community or police agents. [15] Some in the Guatemalan society believe that punishing perpetrators of crimes with extreme violence is more effective than relying on the government mechanism (apprehension, trial, and jail time) for justice. Philip Alston, a United Nations Special

Rapporteur, explains, “Indeed, given the failings of the criminal justice system, turning to on-the-spot executions of suspected criminals appear to some as the only available option.”[16] The lack of trust in the security sector yields a state that cannot protect its people.

Lynch Law is another reported form of “insiders’ justice” where groups, not individuals, conduct the killings. Alston states that lynching is a common practice in Guatemala.[17] Ranun agrees:

“The overall environment of insecurity, a general lack of confidence in the justice system and the state, and in many cases the absence of the state, along with traditions of collective action, have led citizens to take justice in their own hands, including carrying out lynchings, a practice that is relatively frequent in Guatemala.”[18]

Corruption

Corruption compromises the government of Guatemala and promotes impunity. Bunk and Fowler state, “Corruption has abounded and most government institutions have operated for many years in dismal fashion.”[19] Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Lavenson, and Elizabeth Oslesby point out the existence of “hidden powers” tracing back to the civil war. These clandestine networks are comprised of former and active military personnel with ties to organized crime, eroding the security and justice systems.[20] Additionally, Bunk and Fowler describe that, in Guatemala, criminals have been able to buy the support of police members, as well as appointed officials.[21] The fragility of the political system facilitates injustice and undermines democracy. In one direct sentence, Alston summarizes the current state of Guatemala’s security sector: “[It] is a good place to commit a murder because you will almost certainly get away with it...”[22] Elite Guatemalans have been getting away with it for more than half a century.

Introduction to Select Scholarly Works and Thematic Arguments

From 1954 to 1996, Guatemala experienced a violent civil war, resulting in the killings of approximately 200,000 citizens. The particular combination of the civil war’s legacy of violence, a weak state, and the aforementioned modern security issues, create a complex problem for Guatemala’s way ahead. In devising future steps for this nation, along with preventing repetition of security missteps, one must understand the root causes of Guatemala’s problems. This portion of the literature review, therefore, will focus on five select theoretical works relevant to Guatemala’s security and justice problems. First, this review will offer a succinct summary of each select theory. Second, it will thematically compare approaches and arguments, identify divergent and convergent ideas, and expose gaps in the research.

Theoretical Frameworks

John Bailey – Security Trap Construct

In “‘Security Traps’ and Democratic Governability of Latin America,” John Bailey responds systematically to the following question:

“Why political unities (cities, regions, countries) and not others fall into security traps in which crime, violence and corruption become mutually reinforcing in civil society, state, and regime and contribute to low quality democracy?”[23]

To answer this question, he offers two theoretical models: “positive equilibrium,” which relates to efficient relationships between democracy and the security sector, and “negative equilibrium,” which relates to security traps.[24]

Graham Ellison and Nathan W. Pino – Neoliberalism and Globalization Concept

In *Globalization, Police Reform and Development*, Graham Ellison and Nathan W. Pino put forward a unique theoretical approach for the understanding of transnational crime and security based on the influences of neoliberalism and globalization. They discuss the impacts of the global economy network on the security sector of developing countries.

James Mahoney – Path Dependency Model

James Mahoney offers a comprehensive theoretical model directed to understanding and contrasting Central America’s various political outcomes. Mahoney’s work becomes a valuable contribution to the field’s literature because it attempts to identify the root causes of Guatemala’s weak democracy, which one might argue is a contributing factor in Guatemalan security problems. The framework for Mahoney’s theory is path-dependency. The analysis of Mahoney’s theories is based on three works from the author: *The Legacies of Liberalism: Path Dependence and Political Regimes in Central America*; “Radical, Reformist and Aborted Liberalism: Origins of National Regimes in Central America”; and “Path-Dependent Explanations of Regime Change: Central America in Comparative Perspective.”[25]

Mark Ungar – Citizen Security Approach

In *Policing Democracy: Overcoming Obstacles to Citizen Security in Latin America*, Mark Ungar focuses on contemporary analyses, problem-solving approaches, and recommendations for comprehensive reforms in Latin America. With a comparative perspective, he provides succinct theoretical insights on the origins of security problems in the region. Ungar’s work is predominantly based on the evolution—or lack of—community policing and the relationship between citizen protection and democracy.

Heidrun Zinecker – Enabling Structures

In *Violence in Peace: Forms and Causes of Postwar in Guatemala*, Heidrun Zinecker, a scholar from the University of Leipzig, provides a causal analysis for Guatemala’s high levels of crime and violence. Zinecker theorizes that Guatemala has two sets of violence enabling structures: regime

hybridity and rent economy. Furthermore, she asserts that crime prevention structures—such as the police force and judiciary system—are weak and, therefore, contribute to the problem.

Thematic Arguments

Scale and Methodology

An interesting feature in the analyzed theories is spatial scale, ranging from global to regional and country-centric frameworks. Ellison and Pino's theory have a global approach. They argue neoliberal globalization has had "profound effects on security sectors of many nations that include the police, other criminal justice agencies and security organizations, militaries, and intelligence organizations."^[26] They contend contemporary globalization influences current security crises in developing countries. In contrast, Bailey, Mahoney, and Ungar have regional approaches to their theories. For these three scholars, comparing and contrasting is an important conjectural element as they devise hypotheses to explain regional problems. Bailey and Ungar rationalize the connection between democracy and security within a Latin American context while Mahoney focuses on Central America. On the other hand, Zinecker's theoretical approach is country-centric, focusing exclusively on Guatemala. Similar to Mahoney, Zinecker's makes comparisons within Central American countries but only to illustrate the unique character of Guatemala's situation; she does not formulate a general explanation for the entire region.

The theories presented here are the work of respected scholars and drawn from various methodologies. Mahoney's theory is based on the application of comparative historical research. For instance, in *Legacies of Liberalism*, Mahoney comparatively analyzes Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua. In *Policing Democracy*, Ungar constructs his framework on field research and case studies in Honduras, Bolivia, and Argentina. Bailey's Security Trap theory is comprehensive in nature and derived from empirical research in Latin America. Zinecker's work is the result of etiological and social structural approaches taken from criminology and applied to Guatemala exclusively. Finally, Ellison and Pino's methodology is context sensitive, allowing transferability from country to country. They present seven case studies based on their theory: Afghanistan, Brazil, Iraq, Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Analytical Time Periods

The reviewed scholars link their theoretical frameworks on different time periods. Ungar's constructs his theory in a linear sequence. He argues that policing has had mainly three consecutive stages: (1) In the 1800s, police forces were limited to sub-regions and controlled by local leaders; (2) In the 1900s, police forces became a national priority, improving administrative and professionalism, yet weakening citizen participation in monitoring and preventing crime; (3) In the 1960s and 1970s, community policing became prevalent in certain countries—officers became more involved in the community earning the citizens' trust.^[27] Ungar argues that Latin America did not reach the third stage, community policing, because twentieth-century military authoritarianism prevented it.^[28] In contrast, Bailey hypothesizes that for most of Latin America, critical security problems trace back to times of independence, strengthening in later phases such as the populist import substitution industrialization (ISI) period. Bailey briefly highlights the inevitable connection of historical events to modern realities: "The point to stress is that origins and trajectories figure fundamentally in current contexts of public security."^[29] Unlike Ungar, Bailey does not divide Latin America's security trajectory into phases, but rather he sees it as an aggregation of significant events.

Similar to Bailey, Mahoney's path-dependency arguments trace back to Latin America's liberal reforms. To understand Mahoney's temporal argument, it is useful to examine the concept of path dependency. Mahoney explains, "Path-dependent approach emphasizes how actor choices create institutions at critical moments, how these institutions in turn shape subsequent actor behaviors, and how these actor responses in turn culminate in the development of new institutional patterns."^[30] Based on this sequential framework, Mahoney argues the nineteenth-century liberal reform in Central America was the critical juncture that derived three major patterns of liberalism—radical, reformist and aborted—to influence the various political regimes.^[31]

With regard to Guatemala, Mahoney argues that radical liberalism created the structural foundation for the development of an authoritarian military regime. He further explains that liberals favored capitalist growth at the expense of land reform, which undermined peasants, created polarized social classes, and established militarized mechanisms.^[32] Mahoney and Bailey contrast Ungar in attributing the period of liberal reform as the pivotal point for Guatemala; Ungar's stage sequence, on the other hand, start in the 1800s.

The works of Zinecker and Ellison and Pino focus on contemporary elements influencing security. Specific historical periods are not a factor for Zinecker; however, she makes substantial references to Guatemala's weak democracy, which one could argue originated in the period of liberal reform. In this context, a precursor for Zinecker's theory could be the relative prominence and success of democratization movements as Ungar postulates. On the other hand, it is obvious that Ellison and Pino's theoretical approach focuses on a specific modern-time period: neoliberal globalization.

Consolidation of Democracy and Authoritarian Legacies

With the exception of Ellison and Pino, the level of democratic consolidation and the legacy of authoritarian regimes are principle themes among the scholars presented in this literature review. Mahoney suggests that, stemming from the liberal reform, the combination of polarized societies with militarized states became an impediment to the development of democracies. Furthermore, Mahoney links the impacts of military-authoritarianism to the 1990s when the United Nations recognized 200,000 people died during the civil war.^[33] Therefore, Mahoney's theory is relevant in studying Guatemala because it gives an explanation for the persistence and influence of military authority and class polarization in this nation, enabling to high crime, violence, and impunity. Zinecker states that neither democracy nor authoritarianism creates violence. Nevertheless, she explains that the highest levels of violence take place in semi-democracies or transitional democracies, which she calls hybrid regimes. She explains, "The possibility of a high intensity violence becomes reality when regime hybridity is present. This implies the existence of non-democratic regime segments such as political exclusion and the absence of the rule of law."^[34] Seen from this perspective, Zinecker argues that Guatemala is a classic hybrid regime.^[35]

Likewise, Bailey and Ungar are interested in the relationship between the democratic regime performance and the fallacies of the security sector. In determining this relationship, Bailey offers a model applicable to Guatemala: negative equilibrium. The structure of Bailey's negative equilibrium

model relates to security traps and relies on a corruptive feedback loop.[36]

Overlapping clusters of the security sector (crime, violence, corruption, and impunity) are linked to the democratic regime and/or the states administrative apparatus by two causal paths, direct and mediated linkages. Direct linkages include activities such as tax evasion or intimidation of officials while mediated linkages refers to the consequences of crime, violence, and corruption on civil society and the civil society attitudes towards these actions.[37] Bailey points out that under negative equilibrium “the legitimacy of the political unit is weak or absent . . . in this model, elected and appointed officials, as a general practice, behave unethically and commit crimes or take the initiative to prey upon civil society in a variety of ways in order to extract resources or command obedience outside the formal law.”[38] A quick assessment of Guatemala’s democratic stability, health of the security sector, as well as possible corruptive feedback responses, indicate that this nation fits well under Bailey’s security traps model; Guatemala exhibits direct and mediated linkages such as low police performance and a weak judiciary system.

In analyzing the relationship between citizen security and democratic regimes, Ungar argues that weak democracies promote security crises. He states, “Citizen security has become a crisis in Latin America, primarily by feeding off the weakness of democracy.”[39] Ungar’s theoretical approach to the current security problem in Latin America takes into account the endurance of weak democracies as well as the region’s inability to develop adequate police reforms after military authoritarianism.

Security and Judiciary Sector

Unsurprisingly, arguments based on low democratic consolidation and authoritarian legacy lead to further analyses of institutional weakness. With regard to the security sector, Ungar states, “In Latin America the public is increasingly seeing policing as not simply discriminatory or derivational, as in the past, but also illegitimate and unpredictable . . . As a result, people usually do what they can to avoid the police, even when they are crime victims or witnesses.”[40] Furthermore, Ungar explains that authoritarian regimes used the police force and judiciary system to control and manage the population instead of combating and prosecuting crime. As countries transitioned to democracy, he argues, the police maintained its rigid structures creating inefficiencies in the security sector; by the 1990s, crime was at its highest point and the police force inadequacies required significant reforms.[41]

Similarly, Zinecker argues that, although the security and judiciary sectors could prevent violence, they perform poorly. For instance, she contends that the police force is ill equipped, under resourced, and corrupted.[42] Correspondingly, the judiciary system, Zinecker argues, is understaffed, neglected, hierarchical, and bureaucratic.[43] Additionally, she points out Guatemala’s heavy hand, or *mano dura*, tactics and its constitutional right for the military to be involved in domestic affairs makes the security sphere worse and weakens institutional structures.[44] She concludes, “Every gap in the judicial system means a possibility that, because the judicial sector performs poorly, the level of violence will rise because offenders who are not convicted immediately commit new offences.”[45] Zinecker argues that impunity in Guatemala is rooted in the deficiencies of the security sector and the judiciary system.

Noteworthy is the fact that Ellison and Pino completely diverge from earlier arguments on democratization, the legacy of authoritarian regimes, and weak security and justice sectors. These scholars state, “The more one reads about police reform in transitional contexts, states exiting from authoritarian rule, process of democratization, NGO activity, donor aid and security sector reform the more cynical one can become about the efficiency of such endeavors.”[46] For Ellison and Pino, the economic dimension is at the center of their theoretical approach.

Economy Related Factors

Three of the works analyzed in this review discuss security problems in terms of economic challenges. The most salient arguments in the economic dimension come from Ellison and Pino’s *Globalization, Police Reform and Development*. These scholars argue that the dynamics of neoliberal globalization enhance social inequality and create opportunities for “increases in predatory crime, particularly in areas where there are high concentrations of young unemployed males.”[47] Furthermore, they contend neoliberal globalization threatens the state’s sovereignty, giving power to global allocators of capital such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).[48] Ellison and Pino indicate that global mechanisms make it possible for organized crime to align with the government, contributing to corruption.

Zinecker also makes an economy-based argument, not at the macro level, but rather country specific. She explains that rent economy is a key factor underlying Guatemala’s violence and crime problem. She refers to Hartmut Elsenhans’ work to define a central characteristic of rent economies: “A marginal labor force whose members have the physical prerequisites needed to produce more than they need . . . but who cannot do this because the means of production are too high.”[49] According to Zinecker, a rent economy creates a condition in which availability of labor is low, encouraging violence as an alternative for income.

Social Participation, Apathy, and Complicity

Zinecker, Ungar, and Bailey highlight social implications as possible negative factors contributing to Guatemala’s violence, crime, and corruption. Zinecker and Ungar discuss the poor performance of civil society as a contributing factor to insecurity. Zinecker says, “There is very little activity in Guatemala that could be described as participation by civil society in efforts to limit violence by democratic means.”[50] She attributes this problem to post-civil war social fragmentation followed by the dynamics of broken families, immigration, and loss of indigenous values. Additionally, Zinecker explains that in the face of high crimes and low security sector performance, the population compensates by creating vigilante groups.[51] Likewise, Ungar associates social apathy to law and norms as contributing factors to the violence problem. He states, “Many ordinary citizens regard vigilantism as an expression of priority of safety over rights and as their own application of the state’s *mano dura* policy to achieve that priority.”[52] These social expressions, Ungar argues, undermines the possibility of a constructive relationship between the civic sector and the democratic regime.[53]

In a similar way, Bailey states that in examining security trap associations, one can identify patterns and how citizens respond to such patterns.[54] He conceptualizes that the negative equilibrium model is “the unfortunate state of affairs in which notions of law and norms of behavior in civil society differ markedly from formal law, the citizenry tolerates or promotes formally illegal exchanges, and the state and regime themselves act as principal engines of crime, violence and corruption.”[55] Therefore, according to Bailey’s theory, both the civil society the regime along with its mechanisms create the problems of crime, violence, and corruption, which are regenerated by a feedback loop dynamics.[56]

An important point Zinecker brings to light is that if analyzed independently, neither hybrid democracies nor rent economies are reasons for violence, but in conjunction with weak institutions, they become enabling factors. Furthermore, she acknowledges that Nicaragua, being also a hybrid regime and a rent economy, does not experience the high levels of violence reported in Guatemala; however, variations in institutional performance account for the difference. For this reason, she clarifies that causes of high intensity violence and impunity are not linear, but rather integral as part of structural socioeconomic configurations.[57] Bailey agrees; he identifies the relationship between economic and demographic trends with institutional weakness as a crucial element in explaining the rise of criminal violence in mid-twentieth century Latin America.[58]

Gaps

In addressing Guatemala's security issues, one obvious gap is the scarcity of dedicated analysis for this nation. Comparative work, either at the global or regional scales, makes for an important and interesting part of research methodology. Yet very little theoretical work has been written exclusively for Guatemala; Zinecker's *Violence and Peace* is one of few theoretical examples available in this category. In *Legacies of Liberalism*, Mahoney dedicates an entire chapter for Guatemala and El Salvador, but he predominantly discusses nineteenth-century radical liberalism. Ungar and Bailey make a few references to Guatemala but fall short of an in-depth discussion. Ellison and Pino's global approach is possibly adaptable to various developing nations, but their book makes no reference to Guatemala.

As mentioned earlier, these theories are the works of respected scholars. Nevertheless, a critical analysis brings forward some concerns. There are striking similarities among the American scholars—Mahoney, Bailey, and Ungar—in terms of historical trajectory, regional approach, and consolidation of democracy. Yet, the works of Zinecker and Ellison and Pino, printed in Germany and England respectively, offer different views and theoretical models for the security problem in Guatemala, varying in scale and scope. In particular, Ellison and Pino offer a completely different solution, one not based on democracy, yet heavily grounded on modern factors influencing the entire world. In this regard, one might argue that limiting analysis to current economic, social, and political trends disregards the fact that violence and crime precede modern times. Nevertheless, Ellison and Pino offer an interesting theory.

Conclusion

This literature review examined the most significant forms of crime in modern Guatemala, as well as select scholarly works designed to explain the origins of security problems. Current accounts from journalists and academics reveal that drug trafficking, violent gang activity, social cleansing and lynch law, as well as corruption, are the most prevalent forms of crime in Guatemala. In this context, this review analyzed five theories that address the root causes of Guatemala's dilemma: Bailey's security trap construct, Ellison and Pino's neoliberalism and globalization concept, Mahoney's path dependency model, Ungar's citizen security approach, and Zinecker's enabling structures. In general, these theories combine three fundamental elements: democratic consolidation, social apathy and complicity, and economic challenges. The theories offer varying global, regional, and country-centric perspectives. Although insightful, the existence of scholarly literature specifically devised for Guatemala is scarce. It would be beneficial to continue research in this area to advise policy makers on how to correct and prevent further deterioration of Guatemala's security sector, which has already reached a transnational dimension.

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[4] Bunck and Fowler, *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation*, 11.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Bunck and Fowler, *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation*, 480.

[7] *Ibid.*, 480; 482.

[8] Elin Cecile Ranum, "Street Gangs of Guatemala," in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, ed. Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 70.

[9] *Ibid.*, 73.

[10] *Ibid.*, 70; 74.

[11] *Ibid.*, 79.

[12] *Ibid.*, 83.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Ranum, "Street Gangs of Guatemala," 86.

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[16] Philip Alston, "A Good Place to Commit Murder," in *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 474.

[17] Alston, "A Good Place to Commit Murder," 474.

[18] Ranum, "Street Gangs of Guatemala," 85.

[19] Bunck and Fowler, *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation*, 192.

[20] Greg Grandin, Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby, *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2011), 443.

[21] Bunck and Fowler, *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation*, 252.

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[51] Ibid., 38.

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[53] Ibid., 93.

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[55] Ibid., 256.

[56] Ibid., 267.

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